

The Role of the Institutional Setting and its Impact on Education Abroad Policy and Programs

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Institutionally based education abroad professionals, whether they are program directors or advisors, often find themselves playing the role of advocate, historian, guide and persuader as their day to day work and longer term objectives come into contact with various institutional policies, philosophies and practices. To be successful, we often must balance the desired goals of our office with the impact on these goals of institutional forces. As there is no typical U.S. institution of higher education, so there can be no standard set of guidelines that assist us in working within our institutions.

Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind the individual characteristics and peculiarities of institutions. For while there may be national action intended to increase, or encourage an increase, of the numbers of students pursuing some form of academic experience overseas, it remains the case that almost all students who study abroad are, at the time of their decision, enrolled in a U.S. college. Institutional issues, policy and commitment therefore remain as important, if not more so, than national gestures and actions.

However, institutions of higher education are complex; it is often difficult to understand how they operate and difficult to predict how they will respond to internal and external pressures. It is also a challenge to impose a new and different way of doing things. It is therefore important to understand the politics, and indeed policies, of an institution in order to be able to develop and encourage education abroad. Being a leader means, in the manner of how Richard Neustadt described the challenge of being President of the U.S.A., having the power to persuade and the patience to understand, to know what is possible in the context of the realities of the institution.

What are some of the internal complexities that help determine the climate for education abroad and which may need close attention for anyone hoping to affect change? Many of these issues do not exist in isolation from each other; they not only often intersect, but they also involve the same campus players. The following questions frame the complex nature of the academic environment and shape the climate in which education abroad professionals must perform their work.

- Who drives the desire for education abroad opportunities?

Is it faculty driven, supported by an administrative office, or does an administrative office develop programs in cooperation with interested faculty. If the institution has an international mission, or if it talks of being a global or an international university, is this connected in any direct way to education abroad? What is the oversight, as opposed to the reporting lines, of an education abroad office?

- Are education abroad opportunities part of the mission of undergraduate education?

If so, how is this articulated? Is there a clear sense that the institution has clear objectives for education abroad? Or is it just another of the many student related services that institutions now provide, sometimes minimally, and often without much overall strategy? To influence the future of education abroad will mean knowing the history of the program or office: when, how and who decided that education abroad was to be offered at a particular institution is as instructive as knowing the current scenario.

- Who has an interest in the work you do in education abroad at an institution?

Can you feel confident that you could articulate the various parts of the institution that have an interest? Often it is not just the obvious offices and departments that are important. One way to do it is to spend some time, as a staff, detailing all the various offices and units on your campus that have an interest in what you do. Which offices seem favorable and why; which offices seem actively discouraging and why? Are there offices that show a form of "benign neglect" but could, with some effort, turn into your supporters? A secondary question is: Who, on campus, should know about your work?

- How are education abroad opportunities related to broader institutional philosophies? Examples of these would be: the institutional philosophy on admissions; and the financial and educational goals of the home campus curriculum, including, but not related to, language and area studies requirements.

What can we learn from campus admission standards and from an institution's financial aid policies

that would suggest education abroad is a possible, and popular, choice for students? For example, a very selective private institution is likely to accept a certain percentage of students who may already have had some overseas experience which can prepare them for further journeys; institutions whose mission is different may need more incentives to encourage students to spend time overseas. Likewise, financial aid can be used as a strong inducement to allow students to broaden their experiences.

Curriculum issues are also integral to whether an institution might be laying the groundwork for supporting education abroad. For example:

- What are the distribution and graduation requirements?
- Are there area studies majors?
- Do some majors encourage learning about other cultures and areas of the world through overseas experience?
- How secure are faculty in recommending education abroad as a means to meeting home campus requirements, not in a technical, unit count, but rather in a pedagogical sense.
- Does the institution have intentional barriers to education abroad, or are there policies and procedures that indirectly affect education abroad?

What are some of these intentional barriers? It could be the absence of an office providing either programming or advising; or the absence of clearly stated faculty commitment to education abroad suggesting the home institution offers all a student needs academically. It may be that there is a stated policy that institutional financial aid cannot be used to study abroad on programs administered by other institutions. Perhaps the institution allows students to study abroad only on a few selected programs. Such intentional barriers are usually reasonably easy to identify because they tend to be transparent - that is, expressed in writing.

Unintentional barriers are barriers nevertheless; they are difficult to overcome, and often not specifically in place to negatively affect education abroad. These barriers could appear in several ways and include: transfer credit may be possible, but, it is a complicated process; federal financial aid may be difficult to use; faculty may be neutral to education abroad or indifferent; the international office may have minimal staffing with few institutional expectations to increase the numbers of students studying abroad; study abroad may be viewed as a fun thing to do and therefore worthy of only minimal support and little oversight.

Someone trying to affect change on campus will need to clearly identify these obstacles and begin to formulate a list of clearly defined objectives and develop strong arguments to overcome them. To be an effective agent of change, one needs a clear understanding of institutional possibilities: Which obstacles have a chance of being removed, and who might be a partner in removing these obstacles? There may be institutional characteristics, which on the surface, appear to have little to do with education abroad, but, which can be used positively to foster change. For example, faculty may be actively involved in advising and recommending programs, without such advising being well known or understood by the institution; to obtain transfer credit for study abroad, the institution may apply the same flexible guidelines as to domestic transfer credit; the institution may provide four years (or nearly) of housing for its undergraduates—a guarantee that is dependent on a certain number of students not being in residence each quarter or semester.

It is therefore important for education abroad professionals to know the policies and values of an institution, and understand how they affect development and implementation of education abroad opportunities. It is equally important to keep in mind that institutions of higher education can be both dynamic and conservative. The problem is often that they are conservative when we would wish them to be dynamic, and dynamic when we wish they would be conservative.

What are some of the institutional characteristics which may influence the growth and development of education abroad? The following is a summary of key issues:

- What is the focus of study abroad and why is it so? Does the institution administer its own programs, does it belong to consortia, does it just advise, and allow, students to go overseas on a wide variety of programs. Why is this the approach and who supports it? Or is it more the case that it has always been this way?
- Who provides the advising? How involved are faculty or has it been delegated completely to professional staff? Does it matter if this is the case?
- How does the institution define education abroad (if it does)? As a purely academic-classroom activity or involving experiential and service learning? Students are increasingly adventuresome in more than just their destinations; the diversity of their experiences overseas is remarkable: mainstream study abroad programs, internships, volunteer work, ser-

vice learning, intensive language programs, independent research, collaborative research with faculty. Is it possible to paint a full picture of the ways that students at a particular institution pursue their goals overseas?

- Is the diversity of the home student population reflected in education abroad programs? Are older students, disabled students, married students, ethnic students, lesbian, gay and bisexual students encouraged to pursue education abroad?

- What types of programs does the institution sponsor or support? Is there encouragement for academic year programs over quarter or semester programs? Does the institution support the concept of reciprocal exchange programs? Has there been a discussion as the value of one experience over another and if so who is involved in this debate? For many years, one debate within education abroad has been between the “island” program versus the “full immersion” program. This is a simplistic way of looking at the issue as many programs combine elements of both. What is the academic reasoning behind an institution developing one type of program over another?

- How does the institution evaluate and validate its programs? In other words, is there data not just on who goes and where they go, but why they go and what was the affect of the overseas sojourn? If such information is gathered, how is it used? If not collected and kept, why not? What is the process for developing new programs? Is there a mechanism in place that allows for a comprehensive survey of faculty and students—and which incorporates their views along with the academic goals of the institution—in the development of new education abroad programs? How flexible is the structure to allow for change?

Education abroad professionals are genuinely motivated to encourage more students to spend time overseas. To effectively achieve this laudable goal requires an understanding of one’s institutional culture, and also the skills to effectively work within this culture to develop and sustain education abroad programs.